

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
CONTACT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM



PERFORMANCE AUDIT
ISSUED FEBRUARY 11, 2009

LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
1600 NORTH THIRD STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 94397
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA 70804-9397

LEGISLATIVE AUDIT ADVISORY COUNCIL
REPRESENTATIVE NOBLE E. ELLINGTON, CHAIRMAN

SENATOR NICHOLAS “NICK” GAUTREAUX
SENATOR WILLIE L. MOUNT
SENATOR EDWIN R. MURRAY
SENATOR BEN W. NEVERS, SR.
SENATOR JOHN R. SMITH
REPRESENTATIVE NEIL C. ABRAMSON
REPRESENTATIVE CHARLES E. “CHUCK” KLECKLEY
REPRESENTATIVE ANTHONY V. LIGI, JR.
REPRESENTATIVE CEDRIC RICHMOND

LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
STEVE J. THERIOT, CPA

DIRECTOR OF PERFORMANCE AUDIT
DAVID K. GREER, CPA

FOR QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS PERFORMANCE AUDIT, CONTACT
MIKE BATTLE, PERFORMANCE AUDIT MANAGER,
AT 225-339-3800.

Under the provisions of state law, this report is a public document. A copy of this report has been submitted to the Governor, to the Attorney General, and to other public officials as required by state law. A copy of this report has been made available for public inspection at the Baton Rouge office of the Legislative Auditor.

This document is produced by the Legislative Auditor, State of Louisiana, Post Office Box 94397, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804-9397 in accordance with Louisiana Revised Statute 24:513. Ten copies of this public document were produced at an approximate cost of \$33.60. This material was produced in accordance with the standards for state agencies established pursuant to R.S. 43:31. This report is available on the Legislative Auditor’s Web site at www.la.la.gov. When contacting the office, you may refer to Agency ID No. 9726 or Report ID No. 40070026 for additional information.

In compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, if you need special assistance relative to this document, or any documents of the Legislative Auditor, please contact Wayne “Skip” Irwin, Director of Administration, at 225-339-3800.



LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
STEVE J. THERIOT, CPA

February 11, 2009

The Honorable Joel T. Chaisson, II,
President of the Senate
The Honorable Jim Tucker,
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Senator Chaisson and Representative Tucker:

This report provides the results of our performance audit of the Contact Assistance Program, which is administered by the Office of Veterans Benefits within the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). The audit was conducted under the provisions of Title 24 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes of 1950, as amended.

The report contains our findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Appendix C contains DVA's response. I hope this report will benefit you in your legislative decision-making process.

We would like to express our appreciation to the management and staff of the DVA for their assistance during this audit.

Sincerely,

Steve J. Theriot, CPA
Legislative Auditor

SJT/dl

VA09

Executive Summary	3
Audit Initiation, Scope and Methodology	4
Overview of the Department of Veterans Affairs	5
Overview of the Contact Assistance Program.....	7
Has DVA developed a system of outreach to ensure that all veterans are aware of available benefits?.....	8
A List of All Louisiana Veterans Would Help DVA Reach Its Clients More Effectively	8
DVA Management and PSOs Are Not Fully Utilizing Available Outreach Resources and Opportunities.....	9
DVA Should Develop a Method to Measure the Effectiveness of Outreach Efforts	11
Has DVA implemented a system to balance PSOs' workloads to ensure effective service to veterans?.....	11
DVA Management Should Develop a System to Balance Workloads and Enhance Services to Veterans.....	11
Appendices	
Appendix A: Flowchart of the Claims Process for Disability Benefits.....	A.1
Appendix B: Parish Offices: Average Office Visits Per PSO Per Day Open	B.1
Appendix C: Management's Response	C.1

Office of Legislative Auditor

Steve J. Theriot, CPA, Legislative Auditor

Department of Veterans Affairs,
Office of Veterans Benefits
Contact Assistance Program



February 2009

Audit Control # 40070026

Executive Summary

We conducted a performance audit of the Contact Assistance Program of the Office of Veterans Benefits (OVB), located within the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). The results are summarized below.

Objective: Has DVA developed a system of outreach to ensure that all veterans are aware of available benefits?

Results: The DVA and Contact Assistance management have developed a system of outreach and do conduct outreach activities. However, DVA management should strengthen outreach activities to ensure that all veterans are aware of available benefits. DVA does not have a list of all Louisiana veterans and their contact information so that Parish Service Officers (PSOs) can reach out to all veterans. Also, DVA management is not fully utilizing present outreach resources and opportunities. For example, during fiscal year 2008, PSOs in only 29 (50%) of 58 parishes made presentations to veterans and other organizations concerning benefits and DVA's services. Also, many PSOs are not using mailings to reach recently discharged veterans to inform them of available services. Finally, DVA should develop a method to measure the extent to which its outreach efforts are effective in reaching veterans. Such a method would help DVA management assess effectiveness and adjust outreach methods when necessary. (See pages 8-11.)

Objective: Has DVA implemented a system to balance PSOs' workloads to ensure effective service to veterans?

Results: DVA and Contact Assistance program management have not developed a system that effectively balances PSOs' workloads. There is an uneven distribution of workload as PSOs in some parishes are busy with veteran contacts, and PSOs in other parishes are not. During fiscal year 2008, PSOs in 34 parishes averaged less than five veteran office visits per day compared to PSOs in 16 parishes who averaged between five and 10 veteran office visits daily. PSOs in eight parishes averaged more than 10 daily office visits. An uneven workload could result in a reduction in the quality of services to veterans. For example, veterans may experience excessive wait times in busy offices. DVA management should develop and implement methods to distribute the veteran workload more evenly among PSOs. (See pages 11-15.)

Audit Initiation, Scope and Methodology

We conducted this performance audit under the provisions of Title 24 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes of 1950, as amended. The Legislative Auditor developed a plan scheduling a performance audit of the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), and the scheduling of this audit was approved by the Legislative Audit Advisory Council on July 30, 2003. Our risk assessment led us to audit the Contact Assistance program in the Office of Veterans Benefits (OVB).

Also, we conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. Our work covered the period from July 1, 2002, through June 30, 2008. To answer our objectives, we performed the following audit steps:

- Researched and reviewed state law and executive budget documents to determine DVA's legal authority, responsibilities, mission, goals and objectives and to understand state benefits for veterans
- Reviewed federal VA documents to understand federal benefits
- Reviewed audit reports on contact assistance and outreach programs from other states
- Did Internet research to determine outreach efforts and county office staffing methods used in other states
- Contacted officials in some states and discussed outreach and staffing methods
- Toured two war veteran homes and interviewed officials at those homes
- Visited contact assistance offices in 13 parishes to learn how Parish Service Officers (PSOs) perform their jobs and to discuss outreach efforts
- Interviewed three of the four Regional Managers of the Contact Assistance program, and had meetings with the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the OVB to discuss DVA's outreach efforts and other aspects of the Contact Assistance program
- Reviewed how the veterans' disability claims process works and prepared a flow-chart requested by the Secretary of DVA to depict the process (see Appendix A)
- Analyzed Contact Assistance program data (we did not audit these data) concerning total contacts for parish offices and each PSO. Calculated the average number of veteran office visits, per day open, for each PSO in each parish, using office scheduling information obtained from DVA
- Included data from four of the five veterans' war homes in our "total office visits per PSO" analysis (For these four parishes, DVA combines the parish office and war veterans home data. We did not include data for the Ouachita Parish veterans home in our analysis because DVA keeps track of this home's data separately.)

Appendix C contains DVA's response to this report.

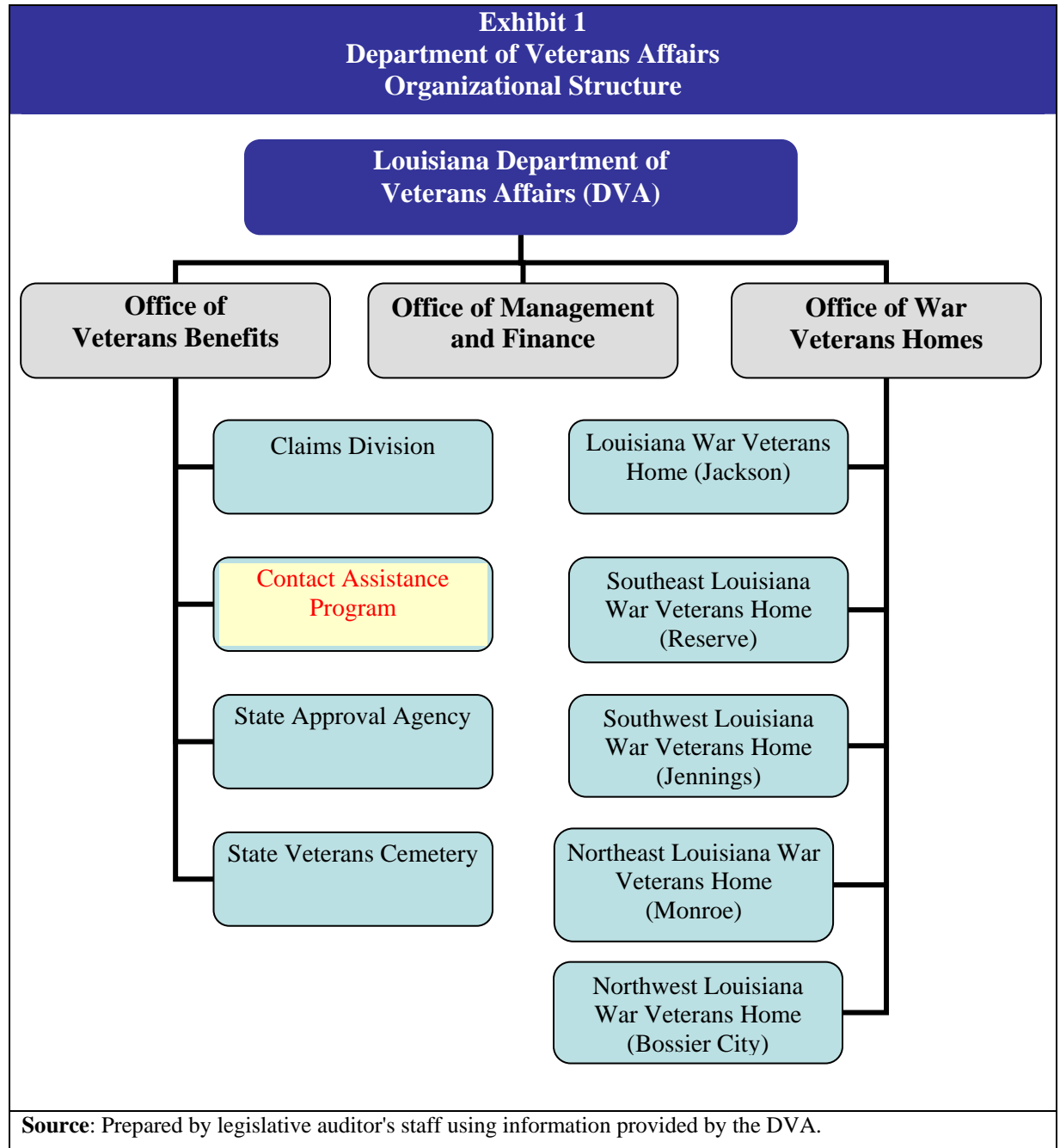
Overview of the Department of Veterans Affairs

Legal Authority and Mission. Louisiana Revised Statute (R.S.) 29:252(A) establishes the DVA. The mission of the department is to aid all veteran residents of Louisiana, along with their dependents and beneficiaries, to receive any and all benefits to which they may be entitled under the laws of the United States or any state. According to the 2000 federal census, 392,486 veterans lived in Louisiana. The federal VA's latest estimate of the state's veteran population is 325,992, as of September 30, 2007.

According to DVA officials, they conduct outreach efforts to fulfill the mission of the department. These efforts include the following:

- Displaying brochures in DVA offices that detail state and federal benefits
- Making presentations to veterans service and other organizations to inform veterans about benefits
- Sending post cards to discharged veterans to let them know of PSOs' services and to provide contact information
- Making presentations to National Guard/Reserve units before they deploy for, and upon return from, active duty
- Participating in pre-discharge briefings at military bases in the state
- Participating in job fairs held throughout Louisiana
- Providing Web site links to federal and state benefit information, which contains a list of parish offices, with the name of the PSO and contact information

Organizational Structure. The DVA accomplishes its mission through three main offices (see Exhibit 1 on the following page). These offices are the OVB, the Office of War Veterans Homes, and the Office of Management and Finance. The Contact Assistance program is in the OVB.



Overview of the Contact Assistance Program

Mission and Goals. The mission of the Contact Assistance program is to aid all veterans and/or their dependents in receiving benefits to which they are entitled. The goals of the program are to

- (1) ensure potential eligible veterans are aware of state and federal benefits;
- (2) provide counseling and assistance for all service persons, and their dependents, who feel they have a claim against the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; and
- (3) assist veterans and their families with various problems.

During state fiscal years 2007 and 2008, the program's Parish Service Officers (PSOs) initially filed 40,788 and 45,770 federal and state claims, respectively, according to DVA data. After the initial filing, many claims require submission of more paperwork and evidence, according to DVA officials. For federal fiscal years 2006 and 2007,¹ Louisiana veterans received approximately \$1.2 and \$1.1 billion, respectively, in federal benefits.

Parish Contact Assistance Offices. PSOs serve veterans residing throughout the state. They help veterans determine what benefits they are eligible for, and then develop and submit claims and other paperwork to the federal VA to obtain benefits. PSOs also assist veterans in processing paperwork for state benefits. In addition, these service officers are to conduct outreach to inform veterans of available benefits and DVA's services. Forty-seven PSOs serve in offices in 58 parishes of the state. There are approximately 68 offices statewide with some parishes having more than one office. There are an additional five PSOs funded through the Office of War Veterans Homes who provide services in the state's five veterans' homes and in parish offices. PSOs serve in every parish except Cameron, Grant, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, and West Feliciana parishes. Exhibit 5 on page 15 shows more information concerning the operating schedules for the parish offices.

State Funding. Exhibit 2 on the following page shows the state appropriated amounts and authorized staffing for the Contact Assistance program for fiscal years 2008 and 2009. Included in the program's 54 authorized positions are 4 regional managers, 3 administrative assistants, and 47 PSO positions. Exhibit 2 does not include the five PSOs funded through DVA's Office of War Veterans Homes.

¹ The federal fiscal year ends on September 30, so data for federal fiscal year 2008 were not readily available.

Exhibit 2 Contact Assistance Program State Appropriations and Positions			
Fiscal Year 2008		Fiscal Year 2009	
Appropriations	Authorized Positions	Appropriations	Authorized Positions
\$2,624,562	54	\$2,680,577	54
Note: The appropriation amounts include local governmental funding. Each fiscal year, approximately \$730,000 of funding came from local governments. Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using Act 18 of the 2007 Regular Session and Act 19 of the 2008 Regular Session.			

Local Funding. DVA does not entirely fund the parish offices. R.S. 29:261 provides that DVA shall contribute not more than 75 percent of the expense for operation and maintenance of the offices. Parish and municipal governments contribute approximately 25 percent of the operational cost, according to DVA officials. Local governments must also provide the space for the office, according to R.S. 29:262. Exhibit 2 shows state figures, which include approximately \$730,000 in funding from local governments each fiscal year.

Has DVA developed a system of outreach to ensure that all veterans are aware of available benefits?

The DVA and Contact Assistance management have developed a system of outreach and do conduct outreach activities (see pages 9-10 for description of activities). However, DVA management should strengthen outreach activities to ensure that all veterans are aware of available benefits. The DVA does not have a list of all Louisiana veterans and their contact information so that the department can reach out to these veterans. Also, DVA management is not fully utilizing all available outreach resources and opportunities. For example, some PSOs do presentations and mailings while others do not. Finally, DVA should develop a method to measure the extent to which its outreach efforts are effective in reaching veterans. Such a method would help DVA management assess effectiveness and adjust outreach methods when necessary.

A List of Louisiana Veterans Would Help DVA Reach Its Clients More Effectively

The DVA does not have a database or list containing the names of all veterans in Louisiana and their contact information. A DVA official informed us that the department could possibly obtain a list of some Louisiana veterans from the Federal VA, but DVA has not done so thus far. DVA's mission is to aid all veteran residents to receive any and all benefits to which they may be entitled. To fulfill the mission, the DVA needs to obtain the names of clients the department could be serving to ensure more client coverage. If the DVA would compile such a list, it could sort the veterans by the parish in which they live. PSOs in each parish could then contact all veterans to inform them of DVA's services and available benefits. In addition, such a

database would make it easier for DVA staff if they needed to get critical information to veterans quickly. The DVA could update this database by using DD-214s. (A DD-214 is the notice of discharge from service that each veteran receives. DVA receives a copy of this form for each discharged veteran.)

Recommendation 1: DVA management should work to develop a database or list of all the state's veterans with their contact information (phone, address, e-mail).

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with this recommendation, but believes it is important not to over-emphasize the ability of any state agency to develop and maintain accurate contact information for an estimated 325,992 veterans living in Louisiana. DVA will begin compiling a list from two sources of data, and study ways to efficiently maintain and utilize the list.

Recommendation 2: DVA management should develop a system to keep the database/list updated.

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with this recommendation. Please see the response to Recommendation 1.

DVA Management and PSOs Are Not Fully Utilizing Available Outreach Resources and Opportunities

Postcards. After visiting PSOs in 13 parishes, we found that only two of the 13 parish offices were mailing postcards to recently discharged veterans. The postcard informs veterans of services provided by the DVA. Since DVA's mission is to aid all veteran residents who are entitled to benefits, PSOs should use this method to reach as many potential clients as possible. If DVA used this outreach method, DVA management could be more certain that all recently discharged veterans become aware of DVA and the services it can provide. DVA officials informed us that these mailouts worked well in the past and they are considering mailing postcards again.

Web site. DVA's Web site contains some incorrect information concerning PSOs' names and the days of the week that parish offices are open. For example, information for Ascension and Livingston parishes is incorrect. We discussed this with OVB staff who acknowledged that some Internet information for parish offices was not up-to-date. DVA had previously requested in November 2007 that an IT contractor for the department update this information. However, as of November 2008, this update had not been completed. To fulfill its mission, DVA needs correct information on its Web site concerning parish office schedules and contacts, making it easier for veterans to obtain services.

Presentations. Some PSOs make presentations to veteran and community organizations concerning benefits and DVA's services, but other PSOs do not. In fiscal year 2008, PSOs in 29 (50%) of 58 parishes made presentations, according to DVA information. Several DVA officials informed us that making presentations to veterans groups is an effective method of outreach.

However, program management is not requiring all PSOs to make presentations. PSOs could be missing opportunities to make veterans aware of DVA's services in their parishes. As stated previously, DVA's mission is to aid all veteran residents who are entitled to benefits. Therefore, PSOs should use this method to reach as many potential clients as possible.

Answering Machines. Not all parish offices have an answering machine. Of the 13 parish offices we visited, six did not have answering machines. These parishes were Ascension, West Baton Rouge, St. Helena, Concordia, Red River, and St. Mary's office in Morgan City. PSOs serve veterans, or their dependents, who come to their office. PSOs also receive and make phone calls with veterans. If a PSO does not answer a phone that rings because he is with a customer or the office is closed, he may miss an opportunity to field a veteran's call and to reach out to the veteran. That veteran may not phone again. When we visited with the Livingston Parish PSO, he informed us that he had 19 calls on his answering machine over a two-day period. PSOs that do not have answering machines are missing opportunities to reach out to and serve veterans. They need such tools to fulfill their mission.

Recommendation 3: DVA management should consider requiring all parish offices to send a postcard to recently discharged veterans, to ensure information about available services is conveyed to more veterans. They should also consider whether this is a function that should be done at the department level.

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with the intent of this recommendation-that newly-discharged veterans be notified of DVA's services. The department will determine the most efficient and effective way to accomplish that intent. The process may begin with a postcard, if all that DVA has is a mailing address; however, DVA's ultimate goal is to obtain and utilize veterans' e-mail addresses.

Recommendation 4: DVA management should ensure that its website contact information for PSOs and parish office schedules is correct and updated on a regular basis.

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation 5: DVA management should consider requiring all PSOs to make presentations to veterans groups to ensure information is conveyed to more veterans.

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with the recommendation and will take steps to implement it. However, some PSOs are located in areas of the state that do not have events or organizations conducive to PSOs' making presentations.

Recommendation 6: DVA management should consider equipping all contact offices with an answering machine to ensure service is provided to more veterans.

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with this recommendation and had implemented it prior to completion of this audit.

DVA Should Develop a Method to Measure the Effectiveness of Outreach Efforts

A DVA official informed us that the department has never surveyed veterans concerning outreach efforts to determine which ones are effective. DVA should develop a method to measure the extent to which its outreach efforts are effective in reaching veterans. This process could be as simple as the PSO asking each veteran seen how he or she learned about veteran benefits and services provided by PSOs. DVA management could then compile and analyze this feedback to determine effectiveness of outreach efforts. DVA could then require all PSOs to employ successful methods and to adjust or discontinue ineffective outreach methods.

Recommendation 7: DVA management should implement a method to collect data and measure the effectiveness of their outreach efforts. They should use these performance data to determine which outreach strategies should be implemented.

Management's Response: DVA management agrees with this recommendation and will develop a means to measure the effectiveness of its outreach efforts.

Has DVA implemented a system to balance PSOs' workloads to ensure effective service to veterans?

DVA management has not implemented a system that balances PSOs' workloads and ensures effective service to veterans. There is an uneven distribution of workload as PSOs in some parishes are busy with veteran contacts, and PSOs in other parishes are not. PSOs in busy offices could be rushing through their work to meet high demands, thereby reducing quality of service. Also, an uneven workload could result in veterans waiting a long time to be served in busy offices and could put increased pressure on busy PSOs. DVA management could develop and implement methods to distribute the veteran workload more evenly among PSOs, which should enhance service to veterans.

DVA Management Should Develop a System to Balance Workloads and Enhance Services to Veterans

Workloads Among PSOs Are Uneven. During fiscal year 2008, PSOs in eight parishes averaged more than 10 office visits per day with veterans. PSOs in 16 parishes averaged between five and 10 office visits per day while PSOs in 34 parishes averaged less than five office visits per day, according to DVA data (see Exhibit 3). Such an uneven distribution of work could affect services provided to veterans. Based on conversations with DVA staff and our observations, we considered PSOs with over 10 office visits per day to be busy. We considered those with approximately five to 10 visits per day to have a medium workload, and PSOs with less than five veteran office visits to have a light workload. For fiscal year 2008, we calculated the average number of office visits per day per PSO in each parish. (We grouped the averages

into three categories in Exhibit 3.) We used veteran office visits to calculate the information shown in Exhibit 3 because visits appear to be the best single indicator of workload.²

Exhibit 3 Contact Assistance Program Distribution of the Average Number of Office Visits Per PSO in Each Parish (Fiscal Year 2008)	
Average Number of Office Visits Per PSO for Each Day Office Is Open	Number of Parishes
Less than 5	34
5 to 10	16
More than 10	8
Total Number of Parishes	58*
Note: *There are contact assistance offices in 58 parishes. Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using data furnished by DVA. The data were not audited.	

Uneven workload affects services to veterans. An uneven workload could result in veterans in some busy offices waiting a long time to be served. In two offices we visited, there were several veterans waiting to be served. We observed two clients leave the waiting areas of these offices without being served. Also, veterans who leave a message on an answering machine may not have the phone call returned because the PSO is too busy. One office informed us that it does not leave its answering machine on after business hours because it does not have the manpower to return calls. In addition, an uneven workload could result in busy PSOs experiencing increased pressure, which could affect productivity. Busy PSOs could also render less than optimal service to some veterans because they are overloaded and rushing through work.

The uneven distribution of workload may be a result of a faulty staffing system used by management. DVA management staffs parish offices based on parishes consistently meeting two of the following three criteria: (1) veteran population in parish; (2) federal VA expenditures; and (3) workload. Higher numbers for these criteria will result in more staff being assigned. However, these criteria may not be the most effective measurement of daily work demands in the individual parishes. For example, if DVA staffs offices based on veteran populations and VA expenditures and not on workload, over staffing or under staffing could occur. For example, based on fiscal year 2007 workload data, Calcasieu Parish has a light workload but has two PSOs because staffing was based on population and VA expenditures. Also, Avoyelles Parish is staffed by one PSO, but its workload level indicates it should be staffed by two PSOs.

² PSOs have a variety of responsibilities, according to DVA. They meet with veterans and their dependents, file claims, talk to veterans on the phone, research federal law to support a veteran's claim, and use the Internet to check the status of claims. If a claim decision is adverse for the veteran, the PSO will work with the veteran to obtain documentation and other information necessary to satisfy the federal VA. In addition, most parish offices have no clerical assistance so PSOs handle filing, process mail, and perform other office duties.

Also, there are problems with how management measures workload. Under the current staffing system, workload is comprised of the following: total claims filed; total contacts; total inquiries; and total letters received by PSOs. “Total contacts” is comprised of office visits, phone calls received, and the number of audience members at a presentation given by a PSO. Cases of double counting could occur, leading to a false inflation of daily activity. For example, when a veteran files a claim, DVA counts this activity as a claim filed and as an office visit. Also, DVA sometimes counts a veteran’s inquiry as both an “inquiry” and either a phone call, office visit, or letter received. Furthermore, if a PSO reports a large audience headcount at a presentation he or she gives and management solely relies on this data, they might conclude that the office is very busy. In fact, the office could be one with a light daily workload. As a result, management could be overstaffing some parishes while understaffing others, because of unrealistic workload reports.

We found further evidence that the staffing system is not working. In fiscal year 2008, Calcasieu Parish averaged 7.0 office visits daily. Beauregard and Jefferson Davis parishes averaged approximately 10 office visits daily. However, Calcasieu Parish had two PSOs while Beauregard and Jefferson Davis both had only one. Similar situations exist with other parishes.

Finally, the staffing system does not address hours of operation at all. The system determines the staffing level for a parish, but does not determine how many days or hours per week a parish office should be open.

Exhibits 4 and 5 on the following pages show the average number of office visits per PSO per day for each parish and parish office schedules. Appendix B contains more detailed data regarding office visits in each parish.

Recommendation 8: DVA management should develop a system to equalize workload among PSOs. This system should ensure that staffing and scheduling are based on workload.

Management’s Response: DVA management offers qualified agreement with this recommendation based upon an imperative and constraints. The overriding imperative is DVA’s mission to serve all veterans and their families. Because veterans live in all 64 parishes, it is DVA’s mission to provide service to each of these 64 parishes.

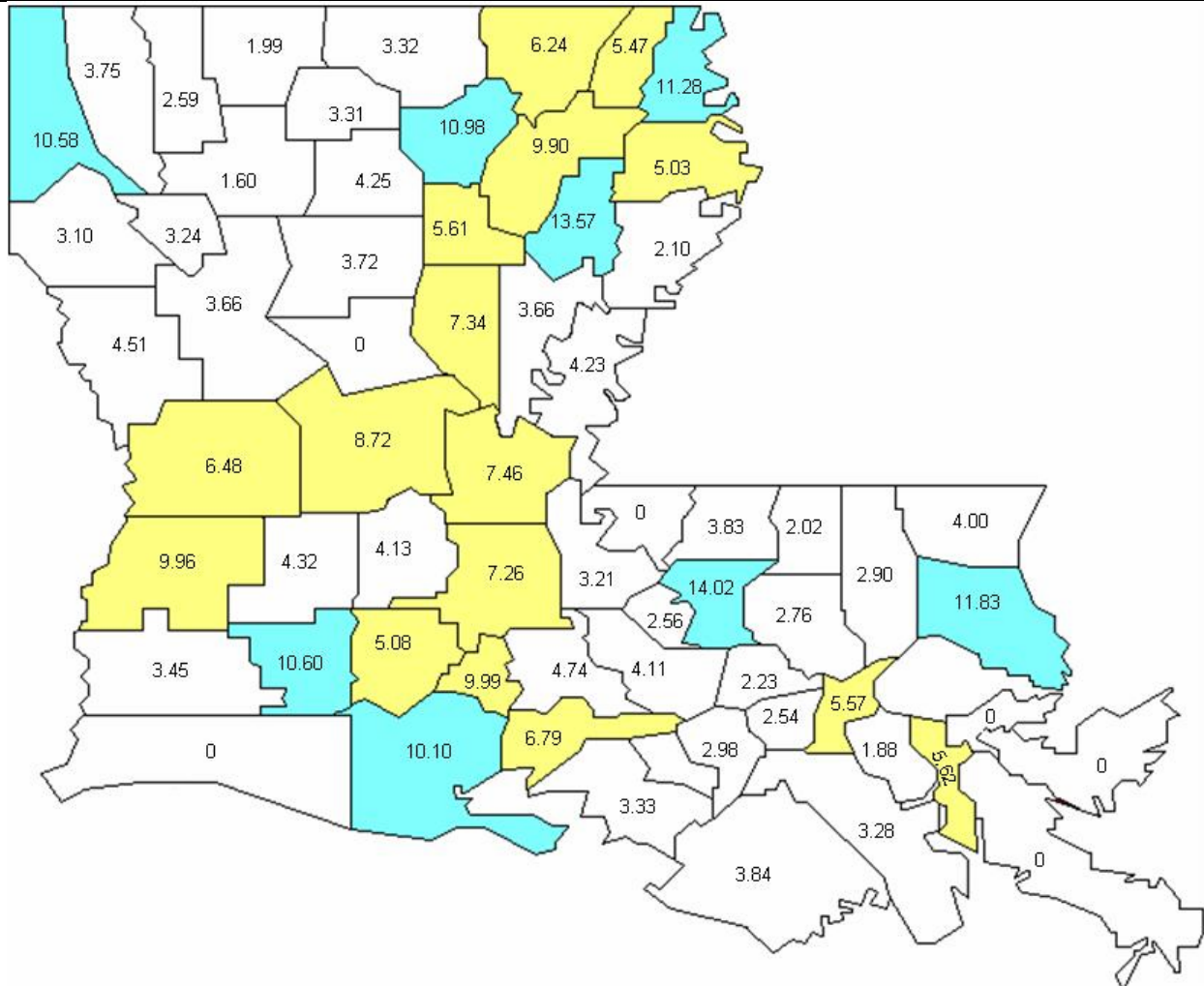
Reconfiguring the balance of PSOs and how much time they spend in each parish is not a project lightly undertaken. Any change to the number of PSO days spent in one parish will cause changes to the amount of local funding mandated by LSA-R.S. 29:261. It is easy to imagine that a parish which would gain PSO days would resist this change because it will cost it more money, and a parish that would lose PSO days would resist such a change even if it would cost it less money. There are other considerations to changing the number of PSOs at a given location—please see DVA’s response in Appendix C.

Recommendation 9: DVA management should ensure that they collect and report workload data that reflect daily work demands.

Management’s Response: DVA management agrees with this recommendation.

Management's Response: DVA management offers qualified agreement with this recommendation. Please see Management's Response to Recommendation 8.

Exhibit 4
Contact Assistance Program
Average Number of Office Visits Per PSO in Each Parish
(Fiscal Year 2008)



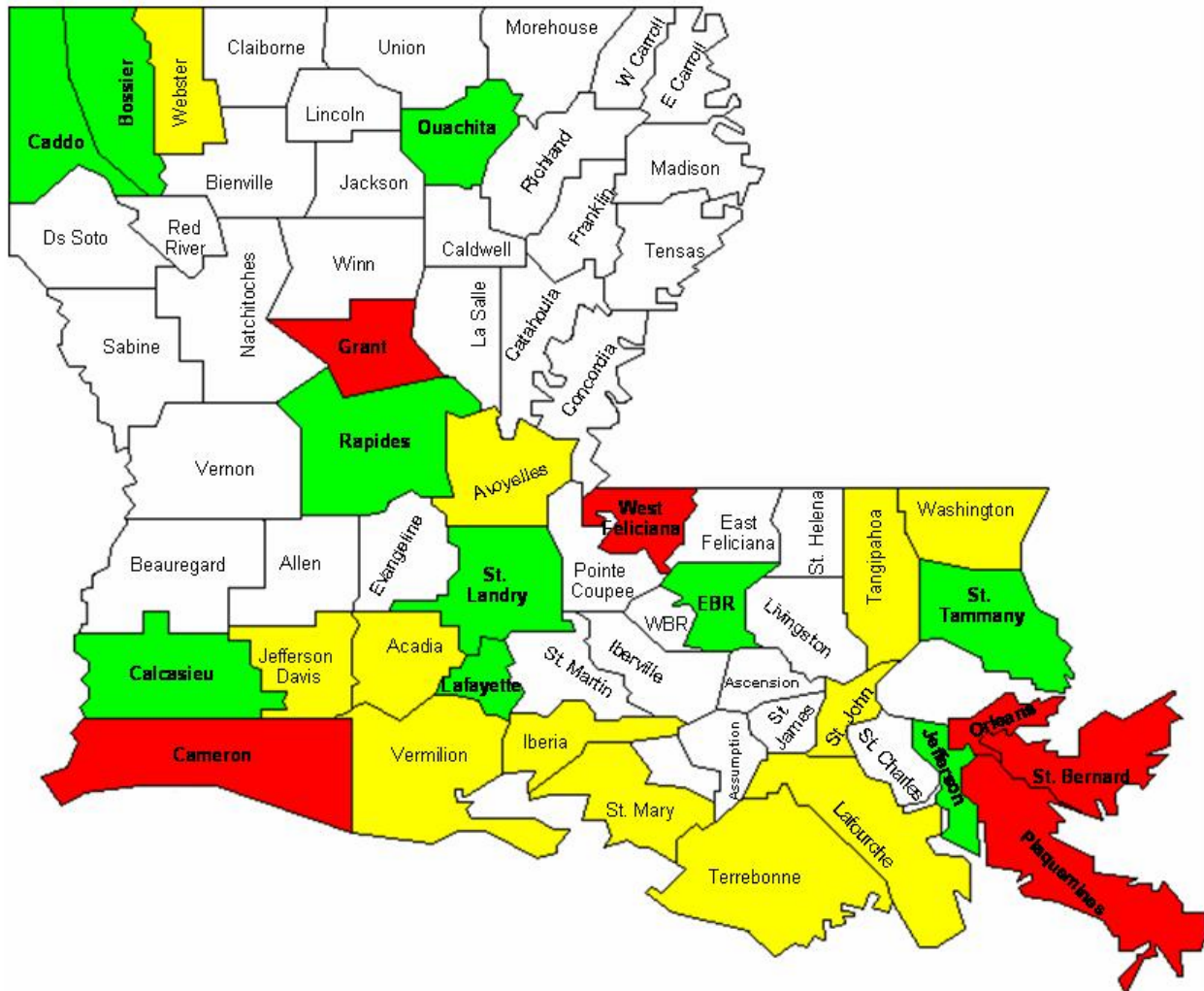
Color Key	Average Number of Office Visits Per PSO Per Day	Number of Parishes
	Less than 5	34
	5 to 10	16
	More than 10	8
	Total Number of Parishes	58*

Note: *There are contact assistance offices open in 58 parishes.

Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using data furnished by DVA. The data were not audited.

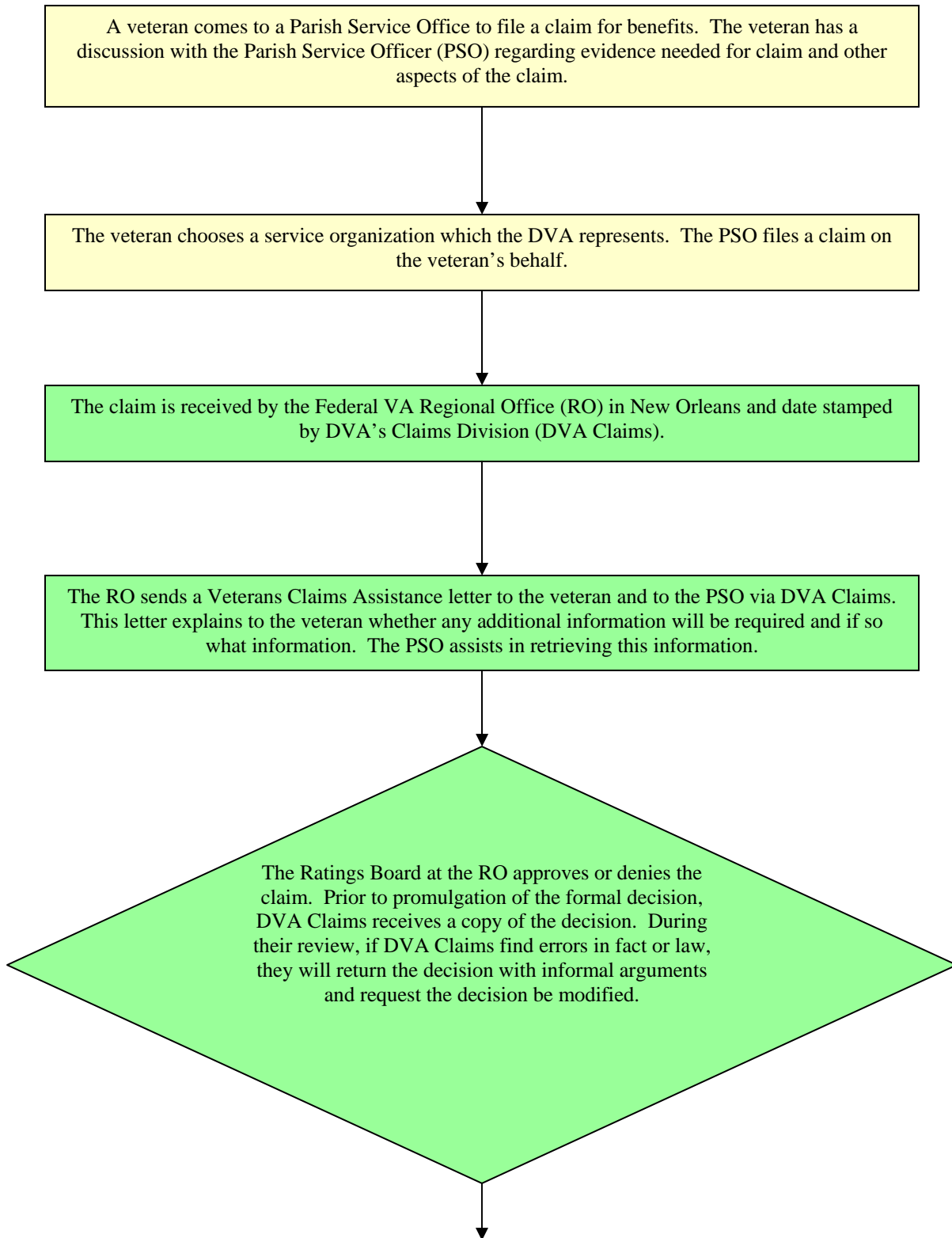
Exhibit 5

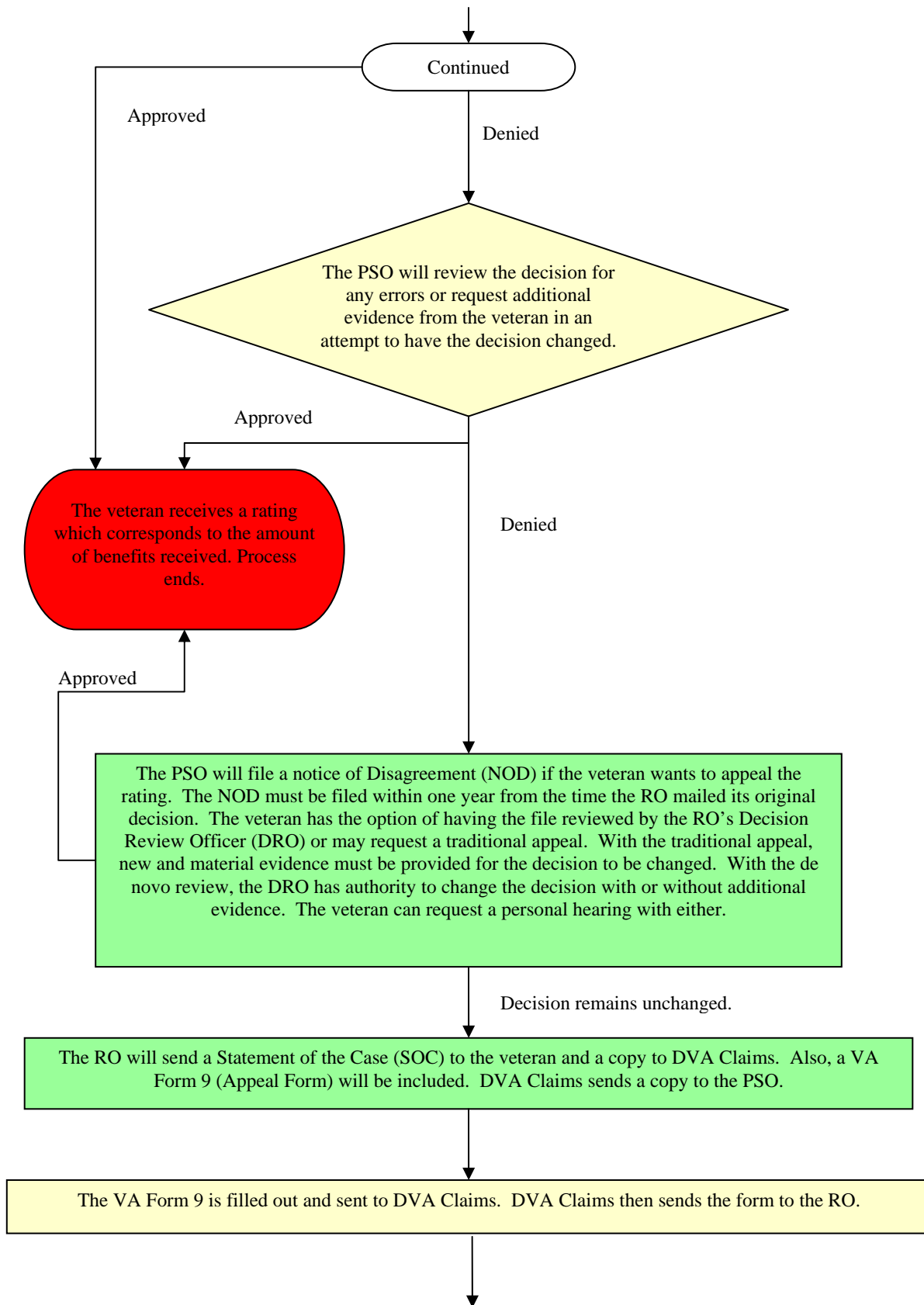
**Parish Contact Assistance Offices
Operation Schedule (Fiscal Year 2008)***

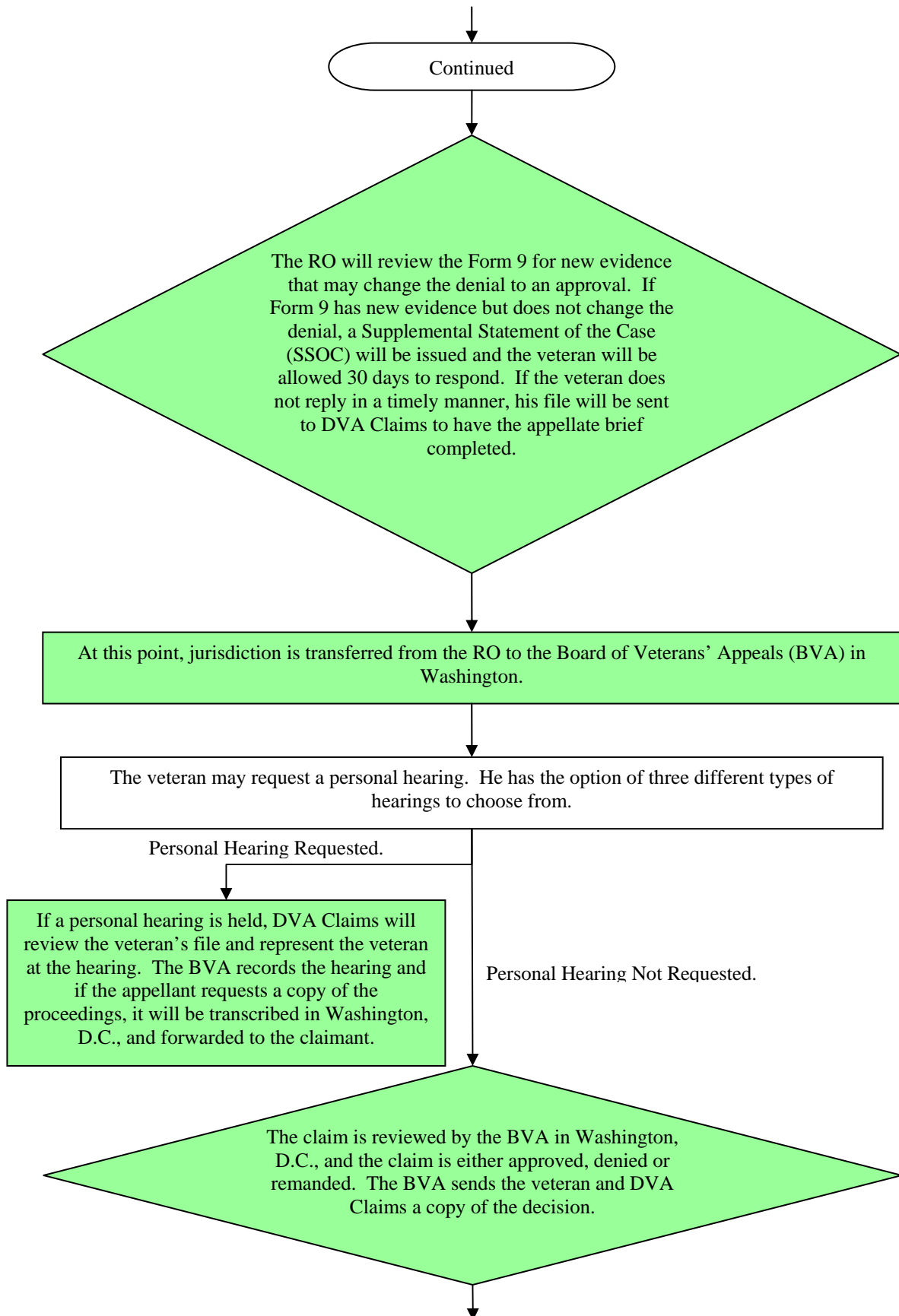


Color Key		Number of PSOs
	Parishes with a contact assistance office open 1 to 4 days per week. One PSO serves the parish. (36 parishes)	17
	Parishes with a contact assistance office open 5 days per week and one PSO in the office. (12 parishes)	12
	Parishes with a contact assistance office open 5 days per week with more than one PSO in the office. (10 parishes)	23
	Parishes without a contact assistance office open. (6 parishes)	0
Note: *This exhibit includes the office schedules and PSOs from the five war veterans' homes. Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using information furnished by DVA.		

This page is intentionally blank.

APPENDIX A: FLOWCHART OF THE CLAIMS PROCESS FOR DISABILITY BENEFITS





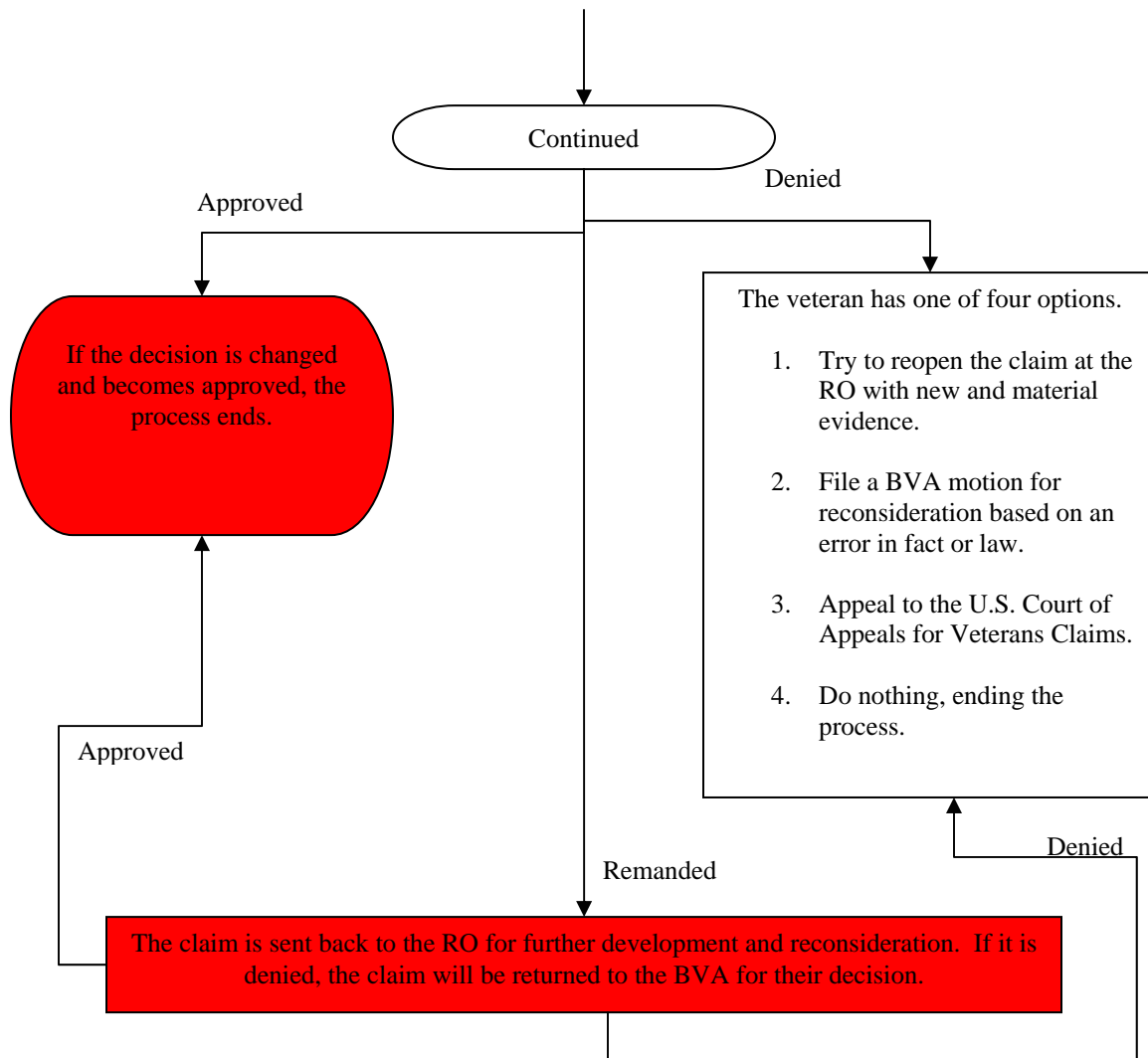


Chart Key (shows whether the staff that takes action is state or federal)

State	
Federal	
Both	

Note: At any time after the original decision at the RO level, the veteran may submit additional or new evidence. This additional evidence may change the decision at any step in the process up until the BVA makes a decision.

Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using information obtained from officials at the DVA and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs pamphlet, "How Do I Appeal."

APPENDIX B: AVERAGE OFFICE VISITS IN PARISH OFFICES

Department of Veterans Affairs Parish Offices: Average Office Visits Per PSO Per Day Open Fiscal Year 2008			
Parish Served	Daily Contacts	Total PSOs	Per PSO
EBR	25.23	1.8*	14.02
Franklin	13.57	1	13.57
St. Tammany (2)	23.66	2	11.83
E. Carroll	11.28	1	11.28
Ouachita	28.56	2.6**	10.98
Jeff Davis	10.60	1	10.60
Caddo	21.16	2	10.58
Vermilion	10.10	1	10.10
Lafayette	19.98	2	9.99
Beauregard	9.96	1	9.96
Richland	9.90	1	9.90
Rapides	17.45	2	8.72
Avoyelles	7.46	1	7.46
LaSalle	7.34	1	7.34
St. Landry	11.62	1.6*	7.26
Iberia	6.79	1	6.79
Vernon	6.48	1	6.48
Morehouse	6.24	1	6.24
Jefferson (2)	22.48	4	5.62
Caldwell	5.61	1	5.61
St. John	5.57	1	5.57
W. Carroll	5.47	1	5.47
Acadia	5.08	1	5.08
Madison	5.03	1	5.03
St. Martin	4.74	1	4.74
Sabine	4.51	1	4.51
Allen	4.32	1	4.32
Jackson	4.25	1	4.25
Concordia	4.23	1	4.23
Evangeline	4.13	1	4.13
Iberville	4.11	1	4.11
Washington	4.00	1	4.00
Terrebonne	3.84	1	3.84
E. Feliciana	3.83	1	3.83
Bossier	7.49	2	3.75
Winn	3.72	1	3.72
Catahoula	3.66	1	3.66

Department of Veterans Affairs Parish Offices: Average Office Visits Per PSO Per Day Open Fiscal Year 2008			
Parish Served	Daily Contacts	Total PSOs	Per PSO
Natchitoches	3.66	1	3.66
Calcasieu	6.90	2	3.45
St. Mary	3.33	1	3.33
Union	3.32	1	3.32
Lincoln	3.31	1	3.31
Lafourche	3.28	1	3.28
Red River	3.24	1	3.24
Pointe Coupee	3.21	1	3.21
Desoto	3.10	1	3.10
Assumption	2.98	1	2.98
Tangipahoa	2.90	1	2.90
Livingston	2.76	1	2.76
Webster	2.59	1	2.59
WBR	2.56	1	2.56
St. James	2.54	1	2.54
Ascension	2.23	1	2.23
Tensas	2.10	1	2.10
St. Helena	2.02	1	2.02
Claiborne	1.99	1	1.99
St. Charles	1.88	1	1.88
Bienville	1.60	1	1.60
State Average			5.46
Notes: *This office has two PSOs. However, one PSO serves in another parish one or two days per week. **This office has three PSOs. However, one PSO serves in the war veterans home two days per week. Cameron, Orleans, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard parish offices were closed during FY 2008. Source: Prepared by the legislative auditor's staff using data furnished by DVA. These data are unaudited.			

APPENDIX C: MANAGEMENT'S RESPONSE



STATE OF LOUISIANA
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



January 14, 2009

Bobby Jindal
Governor

Lane A. Carson
Secretary

Mr. Steve J. Theriot, CPA
Louisiana Legislative Auditor
P. O. Box 94397
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9397

Dear Mr. Theriot:

Please accept my compliments to your staff for their dedication and professionalism in conducting this performance audit of the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (LDVA), Contact Assistance Program. Throughout the audit, it was very apparent that they were sincere in their efforts to learn our processes and they genuinely shared our desire to improve ways to better assist Louisiana Veterans through this program.

With an estimated 325,992 Veterans in Louisiana (which includes as many as 30,000 recent Veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Global War on Terror, but does not include the hundreds of thousands of family members of living and deceased Veterans) and only 52 Parish Service Officers statewide to provide benefits counseling, we welcome the constructive recommendations included in this audit on how to better serve and provide Veterans and their families with valuable information on state and federal benefits.

Perhaps more so than most state agencies, LDVA services a wide spectrum of generations spanning from World War II-era Veterans in their 80's to teenagers and 20-somethings fresh back from conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is this challenge – how to effectively and efficiently deliver information and services to this wide range of generations – that we grapple with to fulfill our mission to serve all Louisiana Veterans and their families. And, it is against this backdrop that the Contact Assistance Program significantly contributes to bringing in an annual amount of over \$600 million in federal VA benefits to Louisiana Veterans.

Mr. Steve J. Theriot, CPA

Page 2

January 14, 2009

I can assure you that we will use this audit to review and improve, where necessary, our business processes and delivery of services to Veterans and their families. Our responses to the specific recommendations are enclosed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lane A. Carson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Lane A. Carson
Secretary

cs

Enclosures



Louisiana Legislative Auditor
Performance Audit Division

Checklist for Audit Recommendations

Instructions to Audited Agency: Please check the appropriate box below for each recommendation. A summary of your response for each recommendation will be included in the body of the report. The entire text of your response will be included as an appendix to the audit report.

RECOMMENDATION(S)	AGREE	PARTIALLY AGREE	DISAGREE
Recommendation 1: DVA management should work to develop a database or list of all the state's veterans with their contact information (phone, address, email).	X		
Recommendation 2: DVA management should develop a system to keep the database/ list updated.	X		
Recommendation 3: DVA management should consider requiring all parish offices to send a postcard to recently discharged veterans, to ensure information about available services is conveyed to more veterans. They should also consider whether this is a function that should be done at the department level.	X		
Recommendation 4: DVA management should ensure that its website contact information for PSOs and parish office schedules is correct and updated on a regular basis.	X		
Recommendation 5: DVA management should consider requiring all PSOs to make presentations to veterans groups, to ensure information is conveyed to more veterans.	X		
Recommendation 6: DVA management should consider equipping all contact offices with an answering machine, to ensure service is provided to more veterans.	X		

Recommendation 7: DVA management should implement a method to collect data and measure the effectiveness of their outreach efforts. They should use these performance data to determine which outreach strategies should be implemented.	X		
Recommendation 8: DVA management should develop a system to equalize workload among PSOs. This system should ensure that staffing and scheduling are based on workload.		X	
Recommendation 9: DVA management should ensure that they collect and report workload data that reflect daily work demands.	X		
Recommendation 10: DVA management should ensure that this system provides for adjustments in staffing and scheduling when work demands change.		X	

Recommendation 1: *LDVA management should work to develop a database or list of all the state's veterans with their contact information (phone, address, email).*

Management Response 1: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation, but believes it important not to over-emphasize the ability of any state or federal agency to develop and maintain accurate contact information for the 325,992 Veterans living in Louisiana. While partial sources of this information are present in discharge papers and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) data, there are weaknesses and inaccuracies inherent in both. Nevertheless, LDVA will begin compiling these two sources of data, investigate further sources of data, and study ways to efficiently maintain and utilize it.

LDVA Management recognizes the potential value of having a comprehensive list of all Louisiana Veterans with which to send out critical information, but firmly believes that the Contact Assistance Program has a high level of "customer awareness" already. In Fiscal Year 2007/2008, LDVA processed 121,495 claims and handled 199,451 contacts (telephone calls, interviews, reviewing/answering correspondence, etc.) in the 58 Parish Service Offices. Based on these high numbers, LDVA firmly believes it is reaching a high percentage of those Veterans who need benefits assistance.

The two known sources include: a) mailing addresses (not email addresses or phone numbers) contained in discharge papers received by LDVA as servicemembers leave active duty; and, b) USDVA information on Veterans who have already registered for benefits.

The potential weaknesses in relying on either of these two sources of information are: 1) the mailing addresses contained in the discharge papers frequently change without further notice to LDVA or USDVA; and, 2) the Veterans who have already registered with the USDVA are, we presume, aware of the means of obtaining benefits information already.

LDVA will also investigate and appraise Internet-based methods of communication such as email.

Recommendation 2: *LDVA management should develop a system to keep the database/list updated.*

Management Response 2: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation. Please see also Management Response 1.

Recommendation 3: *LDVA management should consider requiring all parish offices to send a postcard to recently discharged veterans to ensure information about available services is conveyed to more veterans. They should also consider whether this is a function that should be done at the department level.*

Management Response 3: LDVA Management agrees with the intent of this recommendation – that newly-discharged Veterans be notified of LDVA services – and will determine the most

efficient and effective way to accomplish that intent. This process may necessarily begin with a postcard, if all that LDVA has is a mailing address; however, LDVA's ultimate goal is to obtain and utilize email addresses that require no postage.

Recommendation 4: LDVA management should ensure that its website contact information for PSOs and parish office schedules is correct and updated on a regular basis.

Management Response 4: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation 5: LDVA management should consider requiring all PSOs to make presentations to veterans groups to ensure information is conveyed to more veterans.

Management Response 5: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation and will take steps to implement this recommendation, but notes the following:

Initially, we must note that not every area of the state has events or organizations conducive to giving a presentation. In addition to the service organization participation (below), some PSOs are located in areas that have a higher level of military and/or Veteran activity such as the metropolitan areas and areas surrounding the state's four military bases – Barksdale AFB, Fort Polk, NSA Algiers, and JRB New Orleans. It is those areas where PSOs more consistently have the opportunity to seek out and give presentations on Veterans benefits.

Next, it is very important to note that every PSO employed by LDVA is a Veteran and is a member of one or more service organizations, such as The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Vietnam Veterans of America, etc. While PSOs strictly keep a record of all work-related "contacts" (phone calls, walk-ins, correspondence, presentations, etc.) with Veterans, LDVA policy prohibits the attendance at a service organization meeting as counting as a "presentation." The purpose of this policy is to prevent inflating the number of contacts simply by attending a service organization meeting. However, LDVA will amend this policy to encourage its PSOs to request an annual presentation, where appropriate, at their local service organizations or other groups or events conducive to interest in Veterans issues.

Recommendation 6: LDVA management should consider equipping all contact offices with an answering machine to ensure service is provided to more veterans.

Management Response 6: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation and, prior to receiving the results of this audit, had reached the same conclusion and implemented this recommendation.

Recommendation 7: LDVA management should implement a method to collect data and measure the effectiveness of their outreach efforts. They should use these performance data to determine which outreach strategies should be implemented.

Management Response 7: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation. LDVA currently seeks monthly feedback from a sampling of Veterans who visit each of the parish offices. As each Regional Manager conducts his monthly inspection of the parish offices, he takes a sampling of three Veterans who have visited that office during the previous month and sends them a short, postage-paid postcard to provide feedback to the LDVA Headquarters in Baton Rouge on their experience during that office visit.

In addition to the current sampling, LDVA will develop a means to measure the effectiveness of its outreach efforts.

Recommendation 8: *LDVA management should develop a system to equalize workload among PSOs. This system should ensure that staffing and scheduling are based on workload.*

Management Response 8: LDVA Management offers qualified agreement with this recommendation based upon the following imperative and constraints.

The overriding imperative is the LDVA mission “to serve all Louisiana Veterans and their families.” This mission drives LDVA’s decision-making process. As Veterans live in each of Louisiana’s 64 parishes, it is LDVA’s mission and intent to provide service to each of the 64 parishes.

LDVA currently employs a system of home and itinerant offices where some parish offices have full-time service and others have part-time service during the week. LDVA acknowledges that population shifts and attendance patterns change over the years and the current system should be reviewed and updated, if appropriate.

However, re-configuring this balance is not a project lightly undertaken. Any change to the number of PSO days spent in one parish will cause increases and decreases to the amount of local funding mandated by LSA – R.S. 29:261, necessitating an extensive process of outreach to the parishes to provide information and explanation on the change. It is easy to imagine a situation where a parish resists losing PSO days even if it would cost them less money, and another parish that resists gaining PSO days because it will cost them more money. In short, there currently exists a delicate balance of time and expenditures allocated between parishes and the state.

There are additional considerations to changing the number of PSOs at a given location. For the state civil service, changing the number of personnel in an office changes the ratio of employees to supervisors, potentially changing the civil service classification of that office and opportunities for advancement. While not an insurmountable challenge, the civil service process must be considered when an action may change a person’s job description.

Regarding travel requirements between home and itinerant offices, increasing the distance to an itinerant office from the PSO’s domicile increases the travel time to and from that location and decreases the amount of time available to spend at the itinerant office without incurring

overtime expenses. A PSO is essentially limited to an area surrounding his/her current domicile that allows a reasonable commute to an itinerant office where he/she can spend the maximum amount of time serving Veterans before the return commute.

As LDVA currently has a much smaller number of PSOs (currently 52) than existed approximately 20 years ago (when LDVA had over 120 PSOs to provide service to the state), there is less flexibility to shift current employees to locations within a reasonable commute. LDVA acknowledges that the Veterans population was greater at that time (392,486), as measured by the 2000 U.S. Census, but must stress the dramatic increase in the number of younger, combat Veterans--those who have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Global War on Terror. The current sharp increase in the number of Louisiana Veterans, up to 30,000, who have served in harsh combat environments is a long-term trend unequalled in the State of Louisiana and nationwide since World War II. When the next census is taken in 2010, LDVA expects to see a sharp increase in Veterans requiring services.

Recommendation 9: LDVA management should ensure that they collect and report workload data that reflect daily work demands.

Management Response 9: LDVA Management agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation 10: LDVA management should ensure that this system provides for adjustments in staffing and scheduling when work demands change.

Management Response 10: As stated in Management Response 8, LDVA Management offers qualified agreement with this recommendation. Please see also Management Response 8.